On the Battle for the Afterlives of Post-Mortem Architecture

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The idea of the city as an organism imbued with life and susceptible to death gained widespread popular appeal among urbanists, as well as the general public, with the publication of Jane Jacobs's seminal work, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, in 1961. Jacobs's treatise established metaphoric relationships between the qualities of cities and the actions and dramas of living beings. Recently, the discussion of cities as complex living organisms has shifted from a metaphoric reading to a more performance-based analysis with research by a group of physicists and economists led by Geoffrey West. West has been analyzing urban data from a metabolic point of view, using fractal geometry and scaling relationships in order to speculate the laws by which cities function. That this research has involved an interdisciplinary group of practitioners far removed from urban studies indicates that the idea of the city as a living thing stretches across the spectrum of human knowledge and imagination. Indeed, material on the subject of living cities abounds within the realm of popular culture, and at times, fascination with urban death has precluded that of life. An article published in *Forbes Magazine* in 2008, entitled "America's Fastest Dying Cities," expounds on the death cycles of select American cities, many located in the former manufacturing centers of the Rust Belt, with a list of ten near-casualties.[1] This list considers the statistical categories of population loss, unemployment, and economic prospects as barometers of urban life or death. In 2010, urban activists who objected to the terms of the article responded by formulating an alternative symposium event, entitled Ten Living Cities, that took place in the so-labeled dying city of Dayton, Ohio. With ceremonial irony, this event to celebrate urban vivacity was opened by the same person who had prognosticated doom; the symposium was kick-started in Dayton by Joshua Zumbrun, author of the *Forbes* article. Skeptics mockingly referred to the gathering as "Deathfest."[2] Clearly, the *Forbes* list and the resulting symposium that was organized in protest illustrate that, for many contemporary cities, life and death are meaningful, albeit contested, concepts.

The contested nature of urban life and death is poignantly evident today in Buffalo, New York, site of a feud between two cities separated by 900 miles for the fate of St. Gerard's church, a one hundred year-old work of neo-classical architecture. St. Gerard's has sat empty in a downtrodden eastside neighborhood of Buffalo since 2008, when the archdiocese of the city sanctioned the shuttering of thirty of Buffalo's less attended churches. An article appearing on the front page of the *USA Today* in February 2010 recounts the campaign of Mary Our Queen parish in Norcross, Georgia, just outside of Atlanta, to disassemble the existing stone edifice block by block, transport the remains southward, and re-erect the structure for a growing congregation of southern Catholics.[3] To do so would cost one quarter of the price of a new building of similar stature. The scale of the effort would make this the largest building moved from place to place within the United States. Reactions to the plan by some Buffalo-based preservationists have been as unmoving as the Atlanta camp has been iterant: "Build your own church. We have enough vacant lots", was the response of David Franczyk, president of the Buffalo City Council.[4] Tim Tielman, director of the Campaign for Buffalo History, Architecture and Culture, has been more explicit

about the deadening effects of the proposal. "They want to harvest our architectural heritage and put it in a box."[5] The proposed moving of the church raises intriguing questions with regard to the fate of decaying architecture in the economically impoverished Rust Belt, and intensifies debates of public versus private stewardship of culture. Supporters of the plan have pointed to the progressive nature of "preservation by relocation", a provocative moniker when one considers that the attempt to preserve works of architecture customarily signals the stilling of place, rather than an embrace of displacement. Detractors condemn the proposed move with premonitory warnings, citing the potential flood of historically significant buildings outside of their local contexts, leaving stressed communities unhinged and void-stricken in the aftermath. The resulting feud over the fate of St. Gerard's effectively places Buffalo on the front line in the battle for the spoils of America's Fastest Dying Cities.

Grave robbing is of course nothing new. Neither is the appropriation of architectural fragments from a devastated or conquered territory for the purposes of rebuilding elsewhere. The relocation of buildings also has due precedence, for example in the case of the bridge of London, rebuilt in Lake Havasu City, Arizona in 1971. However, the case of St. Gerard's is particularly noteworthy for the way that the proposed transposition has been publicly framed in terms of life and death of place, and for the associated consequences for decaying Rust Belt architecture. Mary Our Queen parish in Norcross has seized upon the popular mythology of the dying city in order to craft a new mythology of a rejuvenated corpus, positioning the Atlanta suburb as the preferred, post-mortem site for receiving the journeying body of the church. Consequently, the revivifying story conveniently absolves the stakeholders from confronting architecture's more deathly dimensions, including agencies of decay, destruction, disuse and disrepair that may persist in the Rust Belt for some time and that have yet to be embraced for their inherent, creative potential. Through an insistent focus upon restored life, the proposed movement of the church eliminates alternative afterlives for the building, some of which might be imagined by embracing the concept of urban death and looking to the field of mortuary studies. Here, relationships may be cultivated between treatments of the dead city and the post-mortem treatment of bodies. Instead of sanctioning a rite of passage from the realm of the dead to that of the living, we might reflect upon possible approaches to architecture's post-mortem remnants.

THE LIVING CHURCH AND THE DEAD CITY

In building their argument to acquire and move St. Gerard's, the Norcross-based parish has been particularly effective in crafting messages that have emphasized Buffalo's decline and its inability to effectively deal with a significant relic for which no current use exists. Simultaneously, their messages have de-emphasized any interpretation of the church as a spoil, and of its transportation as cultural looting. This has been accomplished through consistently referring to the church not as a relic or ruin, or even as an edifice, but instead as a body. A visit to the website of Mary Our Queen highlights a particularly animating statement about the proposed transposition of the ninety-eight year-old house of worship: "…it is more than a journey. It is a pilgrimage. On this pilgrimage, it is the church itself that is moving."[6] That the parish has billed the dismantlement and reassembly of the forlorn church as a spiritual event is not, in and of itself, surprising. But by recasting the edifice as a mobile body whose fate is to enact a ritual journey, a new story is brought into being. The journey from deathbed to renewed life would not be lacking in appropriate preparations. The parish in Norcross promises to supply an enlivening armature for St. Gerard's. It is with a new steel skeleton that Mary Our Queen proposes to receive the transported fragments. "The structure is ready for disassembly, transfer and re-establishment on a new, stronger superstructure 900 miles away in Atlanta. By itself, this new skeleton will add centuries to the building's life."[7] Note that the emphasis is not upon the structural importance of a new steel frame, but rather upon extending the building's lifespan. The parish has been adamant about the vivifying dimension of their project. "Disassembling, moving and reassembling the church will ensure its life continues as originally intended," another statement asserts, suggesting that the billed ritual passage is part of a natural course of events.[8] In a recent newspaper interview, the Reverend David Dye of the Norcross parish was even more direct as he emphasized the sickliness of the body. "It's like an organ transplant," he stated. "You don't want someone to die but if they are dying, it would be nice if their organs were reused and they lived again."[9]

The new narrative has been strengthened by the parish's underscoring of contrasts between the cities of Buffalo and Atlanta. "Today, Atlanta's suburbs are the fastest-growing in the country, perhaps in the history of the world, according to some scholars," boasts the parish of Mary Our Queen.[10] Contrast that statement with: city of Buffalo, synonym for city-in-decline. "The church's almost certain fate there [in Buffalo], amid the harsh elements, is deterioration, decline and, eventually, destruction."[11] In making the matter an issue of life or death, Mary Our Queen has also suggested that the transposition would involve a temporal, as well as geographic shift: "A priest and his parish are seeking to move one of America's great churches 900 miles into the future," reads another of the parish's promotional statements, advertising unsubstantiated claims of social and cultural progress.[12] The media have been captivated by the associations. "Old Buffalo church to be reborn in Atlanta suburb," reads an Associated Press headline.[13] The strategy of Mary Our Queen has certainly been to leverage the livingness of Atlanta against the death of Buffalo, proposing that a ritual journey southward, as a kind of funerary event leading from the land of the dead to that of the living, is the future of the mortal edifice. This mythology becomes even clearer upon close examination of both the existing Buffalo site and the proposed site of relocation. The two contexts could not be more different. The current site of St. Gerard's is a corner plot of an urban intersection, once one of the most thriving neighborhood's of Buffalo's east side. By contrast, the proposed site of relocation in Norcross is a fifteen acre plot of grass and trees. Architectural renderings of the church relocated in the affluent Atlanta suburb depict a bucolic, country-like setting, fully removed of any urban trace. The drawings convey a temple-on-a-hill image, devoid even of the parking lot that would necessarily accompany the structure. The erasing of any other architectural or urban features effectively severs the church from its rust-laden past. The body passes from the city of the dead to garden paradise.

The persistent mythologizing of the church ultimately becomes a kind of foil for the social, political, and economic conflicts that have led to St. Gerard's abandonment. According to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, "Mythical history is itself in the service of the struggle of structure against events and represents an effort of societies to annul the disturbing action of historical factors; it represents a tactic of annulling

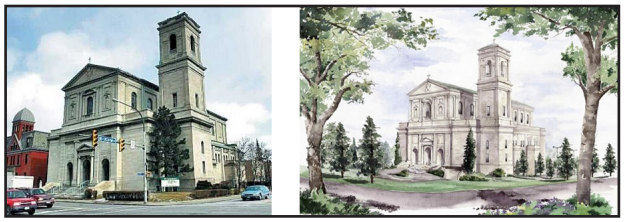

Figure 1: St. Gerard's, Buffalo, NY/Norcross, GA

history, of deadening the effect of events."[14] Historically, the appropriation of building fragments from one culture for use by another has been precipitated by corporal conflict. The crisis that has beset Buffalo, and the Rust Belt in general since the 70's, has been a much more subtle, non-corporal one, though no less violent. Consisting of, as Thomas Sugrue argues, "the convergence of the disparate forces of deindustrialization, racial transformation, and political and ideological conformity," this has been a conflict which has had no clear opponents.[15] And now, the church of St. Gerard's is poised to become not the first casualty, but the first saved body of the non-corporal conflict. The living St. Gerard's is nothing more or less than a substitute for the dead city. Mythical anthropomorphism obscures the real battle, the social and economic crisis that has been raging in the Rust Belt for decades.

TOWARDS A STEWARDSHIP OF URBAN DEATH

Through the use of language brimming with body metaphors and a strategy predicated upon renewed life, Mary Our Queen parish in Norcross has positioned the contested church in ambiguous territory: en route from decaying architectural relic to rejuvenated corpus. Preservation Buffalo Niagara, the region's strongest preservation organization, has acknowledged the complexities of the situation, but has acquiesced to dismantlement and transposition in the face of more difficult urban stewardship. "This proposal illustrates Buffalo's dilemma," the group states. "It highlights the city's architectural richness while also underscoring our economic distress and shrinking population."[16] That architectural richness and economic distress are viewed as mutually negating attributes is unfortunate. The irony is that by embracing Norfolk's strategy of revivification, the Buffalo group is only really sanctioning another, more severe form of loss—the death of death's potential. Architectural critic Herbert Muschamp, writing of the often ignored qualities of the void, has remarked,

"Postindustrial cities that are seeking to remake themselves as cultural centers might also benefit from pondering the success of failure: the glamour of their own collapse."[17] According to Muschamp, "Emptiness, obscurity, failure, bleakness, pallor—such noir terms are not found in the vocabulary of civic success with which urban revitalization programs are typically promoted. But these terms should be permissible wherever culture comes up."[18] So too should these terms be permissible whenever culture comes down, and most certainly when it is transported and re-erected elsewhere. Infused with fresh life, the revivifying story of St. Gerard's relieves the primary stakeholders from inventing and testing new approaches to preservation that might involve, not negate, the supposedly less-desirable forces of decay and ruination. "If we work to stop this move, we are likely to see accelerating damage," reads another statement issued by the preservation group.[19] Embodied in this assertion is the astounding idea that disassembly and movement would be non-damaging. That this traditionally conservative group would prefer to see the structure dismantled and exported, rather than engage such ever-present effects as time and weathering, is indicative of the preservation industry's pathology. Clearly, confronting urban death remains a difficult problem for those concerned with architectural monuments—the story of St. Gerard's renewed life, even if that life is elsewhere, is a comfortable substitute. Preservation theorist Jorge Otero-Pailos has suggested that remaining open to external, incomplete forces is of critical importance for dealing with historic structures today. "How we retain that unfinished openness of the past, while critiquing the idea that the new is ever outside of history, is an important challenge that lies ahead for the field of historic preservation," he writes.[20] Otero-Pailos' remarks are incredibly suggestive for a city such as Buffalo, where an abundance of significant architecture and a lack of monetary resources necessitate creative solutions to the management of decaying cultural heritage.

If, as has been suggested, the moving of St. Gerard's constitutes a kind of funerary event, a rite of passage from the dead city to renewed life, then it might be productive to consider how social dimensions of mortuary practice can heighten an awareness of the underlying issues. The field of mortuary studies could allow us to understand the transposition within a new set of terms and might suggest alternative possible futures for the building's stones. Anthropologist Seth Richardson, for example, in his writings on death, dismemberment, and discorporation, has contested the emphasis traditionally given to funerary practices within his field, instead focusing his attention upon the port-mortem treatment of bodies.[21] The notion of derelict buildings as post-mortem remains, or deceased architectural bodies, could potentially shed new light on the debate over St. Gerard's fate, and might shift the field of preservation towards a stewardship of urban death. Richardson argues that our fears of not performing funerary rites upon the corpse in accordance with socially and culturally accepted standards is an under-recognized aspect of mortuary practice. He writes that "the proper treatment of the dead body in burial must be uncovered as a form which (like other cultural practices) derives its meaning and force not only through ideal observance, but also through social knowledge and fear of non-performance, denial, or inversion."[22] In pointing out the fears associated with not acting in a socially and culturally acceptable manner upon the corpse, Richardson emphasizes that "violation of normal funerary practice, like proper burial, is an ambivalent and changeable symbol, with a range of emphasis and importance within the rhetorical systems which construct them."[23] It is possible then, that by cultivating an awareness of architectural preservation as one of many possible operations upon the deceased architectural body, that architects, urbanists, and preservationists may expand their capacity to deal with the dying city. Richardson elaborates on a range of alternative ways of regarding the corpse, with respect to burial as the norm:

> Our texts about burial already do not so much document practice as they project idealizing and normative precepts, and the exceptions are those instances in which they deal with deviations from the norm. This being the case, we are obligated to do more than look at burial as an "ideal type" purely upholding social inclusion, but also investigate instances in which the treatment of the body was intended to discorporate social elements through violations of burial: the display or exposure of the dead body, head, or (more rarely) other pars pro toto, without burial; corpse abuse and dismemberment; corpse abandonment; burial-as-trophy; disinterment…[24]

Richardson argues that discorporation of the body is intricately bound to discorporation of social structures. Along these lines, there are numerous precedents for sculptures, monuments, and buildings

that have been proposed or constructed from post-mortem remnants in order to critically respond to social conflicts. In the wake of the French Revolution, Jacques-Louis David proposed a monument made of the rubble of vandalized royal statuary. Elaborating upon the symbolism of his proposal, he writes, "...let disorderly piles of the truncated debris of their statues form a lasting monument to the glory of the people and their debasement, so that he who travels through this new land with a didactic purpose, will say; 'I once saw kings in Paris, the objects of a humiliating idolatry; I went there again, and they were there no more.'"[25] In Los Angeles, CA in the 1960's, assemblage artists united to construct works of art from the smoldering debris of the Watts riots, exhibiting the reformed three tons of rubble collectively in the show "66 Signs of Neon," organized by sculptor Noah Purifoy. The traveling exhibition constituted a powerful response to the destruction of the rioting, and introduced an activist practice into the discourse of the art world. Since the end of the soviet empire, much discussion has ensued regarding how to deal with soviet monuments scattered throughout Russia and Eastern Europe. In 1992, the Russian artists Komar and Melamid solicited an open call to artists, asking for proposals on saving and transforming the monuments, as an alternative to their destruction. They argue, "Soviet monuments loomed over our childhood, we fear we may vanish with them. That is why we are trying to prolong their existence."[26] Le Corbusier likely had quite a different, but not unrelated, view in mind when his much revered thick walls of the chapel at Ronchamp were constructed from the remains of the previous church on the site, a structure that had been destroyed during World War II. More recently, cultural critic Camilo José Vergara incited controversy for his "skyscraper ruins park," a proposal to set aside twelve square blocks of downtown Detroit as a center for the preservation of urban deterioration and emptiness. In each of these aforementioned examples, operations upon post-mortem remains addressed the conflicts which the remains signified, and encouraged transcendence of those histories.

In light of these observations, I would like to introduce here a project that I undertook from 2004-2009 in Buffalo. During this period of time, I earned a significant portion of my living by working part-time as a demolition laborer in the city. Within this environment of 20,000 vacant properties, where the mayor aims to demolish 5,000 buildings in five years, demolition is, ironically, considered an industry of growth. On and off over that six year time-span, I was employed at the site of the Farrar Mansion, a long vacant, historically significant structure located in the center of the city. A relic of Buffalo's prosperous, industrial past, the mansion was undergoing a restoration of its original 1870's core and a gutting of its early to mid-20th century additions. Shortly after commencing work on the property, I secured permission from the owner to utilize the back portion of the building in order to undertake a series of installations with demolition debris. The back half of the structure was soon transformed into a site for the continuous collection and reassembly of discarded building materials gathered from sites of city-wide demolitions and renovations. A range of sprawling, aggregated environments thus took shape within the gutted insides of the mansion's shadow. Materials were alternately organized and re-organized, cut and re-cut, layered and re-layered, marked and re-marked. Meanwhile, the original restoration effort, which preserved and highlighted such features as the mansion's hand carved woodwork, continued intermittently within the building's street-facing front half.

Fig. 2: Farrar Mansion Project, Buffalo, NY. Restoration I. 2004-2009.

Over the course of six years, the Farrar Mansion was opened to the public on two occasions (once in collaboration with a local gallery) for the viewing of these two contrasting post-mortem operations. In April of 2009, having filled the back half of the site to near capacity with debris, I was asked by the owner to clear the collected materials from the building. This two-sided project displaces the concepts of preservation and restoration, focusing instead upon the dialectic between urban life and death. On one side of the structure, change over

time is willfully instigated while on the other, it is steadfastly resisted. Arrested decay becomes not a visible phenomena, but an absent dividing line, lying somewhere between the pristine, protected surfaces of the mansion's front half and the rough, continuously reassembled fragments of prior urban destructions. It is my hope that the project might be seen as a potential model for embracing a more complex and nuanced understanding of urban life and death, a model that suggests new possibilities for architecture within our culturally embodied attitudes toward material ends.

Fig. 3-5: Farrar Mansion Project, Buffalo, NY. Restoration II. 2004-2009.

ENDNOTES

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

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26 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "We Remember, or So It Seems." *Monumental Propaganda*, exhibition catalog, (New York: Independent Curators Inc., 1994).